

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A computer-implemented method of assisting users in evaluating items within an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

tracking purchases made from the electronic catalog by each of a plurality of users to generate purchase history data;

providing a user interface through which the users can selectively elect to expose their respective purchase histories to other users;

collecting and storing permission data obtained through the user interface, said permission data indicating, for each first user, a set of additional users that are permitted to view purchase history data of that first user;

monitoring online browsing of the electronic catalog of items by a current user to detect a request by the current user for a catalog page that includes a description of a first item;

in response to the request, accessing the permission data and the purchase history data associated with other users to identify a second user that both (a) has purchased the first item, and (b) has elected to expose purchase history data to the current user; and

in response to identifying the second user, supplementing the catalog page with a notification that the first item has been purchased by the second user, and returning the catalog page as supplemented to the current user;

whereby users are exposed to purchases made by other users during browsing of the electronic catalog.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein the user interface permits users to limit exposure of their respective purchase histories to specific communities.

3. The method of Claim 1, wherein the user interface permits users to limit exposure of their respective purchases to other users on a user-by-user basis.

4. The method of Claim 1, wherein the user interface permits users to limit exposure of their respective purchases to other users on a item-by-item basis.

5. The method of Claim 1, wherein the user interface permits users to limit exposure of their respective purchase histories to specific product categories.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein accessing the permission data and the purchase history data comprises accessing a table that maps each of a plurality of items to a respective set of users who purchased that item.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the catalog page is an item detail page for the first item.

8. The method of Claim 1, further comprising, in response to identifying the second user, providing an option to the current user to send a message to the second user.

9. The method of Claim 8, wherein providing an option to the current user comprises providing an option to send an instant message to the second user.

10. A method of assisting users in evaluating items of an electronic catalog of items, the catalog accessible to users of an online store that provides services for allowing users to purchase items from the catalog, the method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

identifying an item to be displayed to a first user in an item detail page of the electronic catalog;

identifying a second user that both (a) has made a purchase of the item and (b) has elected, via a user interface associated with the electronic catalog, to expose said purchase to at least the first user; and

in response to identifying the second user, electronically notifying the first user that the item has been purchased by the second user, and providing contact information of the second user to the first user to allow the first user to communicate with the second user about the item;

wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises supplementing the item detail page of the electronic catalog with a notification message to personalize the item detail page for the first user.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein identifying the second user comprises:

identifying a user community of which the first user is a member; and
determining whether another member of the community has purchased the item.

12. The method of Claim 11, wherein the community is a private community.

13. The method of Claim 11, wherein the community consists of users listed in an electronic address book of the first user.

14. The method of Claim 10, wherein identifying an item to display to the first user comprises:

identifying a community of which the first user is a member; and
identifying an item that is popular within the community.

15. The method of Claim 14, wherein identifying an item that is popular within the community comprises identifying at least one item which, based on purchases made within the community relative to purchases made within a general user population, distinguishes the community from the general user population.

16. The method of Claim 10, wherein electronically notifying comprises supplementing a product detail page requested by the first user during online browsing of the electronic catalog.

17. The method of Claim 10, wherein the item detail page is a page that provides an option to purchase the item.

18. The method of Claim 10, further comprising generating a data structure which maps items to users that purchased the items.

19. The method of Claim 10, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

20. The method of Claim 10, further comprising presenting to users of the store at least one option screen which permits users to authorize release of contact information to other users on at least one of (a) a user-by-user basis, and (b) a community-by-community basis.

21. The method of Claim 10, wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.

22. The method of Claim 10, wherein the method is performed during online browsing of the electronic catalog by the first user.

23. A system for assisting users of an online store in evaluating items of an electronic catalog of items, the system comprising:

an item-to-user mapping table which maps items from the catalog to users that have purchased said items, said item-to-user mapping table being stored in a computer-readable medium and reflecting personal preferences specified by said users regarding exposing purchases and contact information to other users; and

a computer system that executes a personalization process which responds to an online request by a first user to view a description of an item from the catalog by at least (a) accessing the item-to-user mapping table to identify a second user that both has purchased the item and is a member of a community associated with the first member, and (b) displaying contact information of the second user to the first user in conjunction with the description of the item such that the contact information is presented to the second user during browsing of the electronic catalog, whereby the personalization process exposes purchases and contact information of the second user to other users in accordance with the personal preferences of the second user.

24. The system of Claim 23, wherein the item-to-user mapping table maps items to users that purchased the items for each of a plurality of communities, and the process uses the item-to-user mapping table to locate a fellow community member that purchased the item.

25. The system of Claim 23, wherein the item-to-user mapping table contains the contact information of users.

26. The system of Claim 23, wherein the contact information includes email aliases for at least some of the users.

27. The system of Claim 23, wherein the contact information is displayed in conjunction with an option for the first user to chat online with the second user.

28. The system of Claim 23, wherein the personalization process displays the contact information of the second user by supplementing a catalog page requested by the first user.

29. The system of Claim 23, wherein the community is an explicit membership community.

30. The system of Claim 23, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

31. The system of Claim 23, wherein the community is a private community.

32. The system of Claim 23, wherein the community consists of users listed in an electronic address book of the first user.

33. A computer-implemented method of assisting a first user in evaluating a merchant, comprising:

identifying a community associated with the first user;

identifying a second user that is a member of the community and that has engaged in business with the merchant, said second user being a user who has opted to expose to the first user identities of merchants with which the second user has engaged in business, as reflected within preference data stored for the second user; and

electronically notifying the first user of the contact information of the second user to allow the first user to communicate with the second user about the merchant, wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises personalizing a web page requested by the first user during a browsing session.

34. The method of Claim 33, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

35. The method of Claim 34, wherein the implicit membership community is based on email addresses of users.

36. The method of Claim 33, wherein electronically notifying comprises accessing a merchant-to-user mapping table which maps merchants to users that have engaged in business with such merchants for each of a plurality of communities.

37. The method of Claim 33, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

38. The method of Claim 33, wherein the merchant is a seller on an online auction Web site, and the first user is electronically notified of the contact information of the second user in response to an action performed by the first user while browsing the Web site.

39. The method of Claim 33, wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.

40. The method of Claim 33, wherein the community is an explicit membership community of which the first user is a member.

41. The method of Claim 33, wherein the community is a private community.

42. The method of Claim 33, wherein the community is based on an electronic address book of the first user.

43. The method of Claim 33, wherein the merchant is a seller on an online auction site, and the web page is a page of said online auction site that displays an auction of the seller.

44. An electronic catalog system, comprising: /

an electronic catalog of items that are available for purchase, the electronic catalog including pages that include descriptions of the items, and providing functionality for online users to select items to purchase, wherein the electronic catalog is embodied within a computer-readable medium;

a user interface through which the users can selectively elect to expose their respective purchase histories to other users, the user interface being embodied within a computer-readable medium;

a database which stores information about a plurality of groups of users, wherein each group represents a subset of a general user population, said database further storing preference data indicative of elections made by the users to expose their respective purchase histories to other users; and

a computer system that executes a personalization component which is responsive to an online request from a first user for a catalog page that includes a description of a first item, by at least (a) determining whether the first item has been purchased by a second user who belongs to a selected group of said plurality of groups, said selected group being associated with the first user, and (b) in response to detecting that the first item has been purchased by the second user, notifying the first user during browsing of the electronic catalog that the first item has been purchased by the second user, wherein the personalization component uses said preference data to determine whether, and to whom, a given purchase may be exposed.

45. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the selected group consists of a set of contacts of the first user.

46. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the selected group consists of users listed in an electronic address book of the first user.

47. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the personalization component notifies the first user that the first item has been purchased by the second user by supplementing the catalog page requested by the first user.

48. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the personalization component further provides contact information of the second user to the first user.

49. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the personalization component further provides an option for the first user to send a message to the second user.

50. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the selected group consists of members of an explicit membership community.

51. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the selected group consists of members of an implicit membership community.

52. The electronic catalog system of Claim 44, wherein the selected group is a private group of users.

53. A computer implemented method of assisting users in selecting items to purchase from an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

maintaining purchase history data for each of a plurality of users of the electronic catalog;

maintaining community data indicative of user memberships within specific explicit-membership communities that users explicitly join, wherein each of the explicit-membership communities represents a respective subset of a general user population;

monitoring online browsing of the electronic catalog by a first user who is a member of an explicit-membership community to detect that an item accessed by the first user has been purchased by a second user who is also a member of the explicit-membership community, as reflected by the purchase history data and the community data; and

in response to detecting that the item has been purchased by the second user, supplementing a catalog page requested by the first user to include a notification that the item has been purchased by the second user, said catalog page being a page on which the item is displayed, wherein the step of supplementing the catalog page is performed in accordance with permissions specified by the second user via a user interface that allows users to limit exposure of their respective purchases to other users on a community-by-community basis.

54. The method of Claim 53, further comprising, in response to detecting that the item has been purchased by the second user, providing an option to the first user to send a message to the second user.

55. The method of Claim 54, wherein providing an option to the first user comprises providing an option to send an instant message to the second user.

56. The method of Claim 53, wherein the catalog page is an item detail page.

57. The method of Claim 53, wherein the notification includes contact information of the second user.

58. The method of Claim 53, wherein the community is a private community.

59. A computer implemented method of assisting users in selecting items to purchase from an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

maintaining purchase history data for each of a plurality of users of the electronic catalog;

maintaining community data indicative of user memberships within specific explicit-membership communities that users explicitly join, wherein each of the explicit-membership communities represents a respective subset of a general user population;

monitoring online browsing of the electronic catalog by a first user who is a member of an explicit-membership community to detect that an item accessed by the first user has been purchased by a second user who is also a member of the explicit-membership community, as reflected by the purchase history data and the community data; and

in response to detecting that the item has been purchased by the second user, supplementing a catalog page requested by the first user to include a notification that the item has been purchased by the second user, said catalog page being a page on which the item is displayed, wherein the step of supplementing the catalog page is performed in accordance with permissions specified by the second user via a user interface that allows users to limit exposure of their respective purchases to other users on at least one of (a) an item-by-item basis and (b) a user-by-user basis.

60. The method of Claim 59, further comprising, in response to detecting that the item has been purchased by the second user, providing an option to the first user to send a message to the second user.

61. The method of Claim 60, wherein providing an option to the first user comprises providing an option to send an instant message to the second user.

62. The method of Claim 59, wherein the catalog page is an item detail page.

63. The method of Claim 59, wherein the notification includes contact information of the second user.

64. The method of Claim 59, wherein the community is a private community.